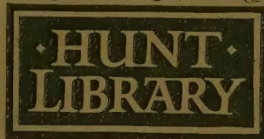




Carnegie Institute of Technology



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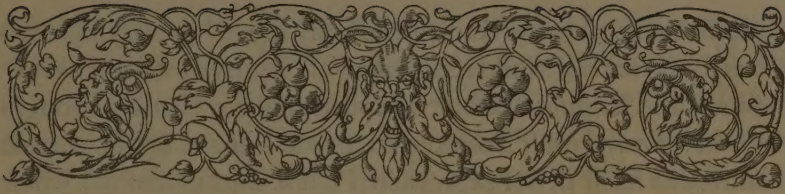
WITHDRAWN
CARNEGIE
MELLON



♣ THE CENTAUR. A TRANSLATION BY
GEORGE B. IVES FROM THE FRENCH OF
MAURICE DE GUÉRIN



MDCCCCXV



THE CENTAUR. WRITTEN BY MAURICE DE
GUÉRIN AND NOW TRANSLATED FROM THE
FRENCH BY GEORGE B. IVES.



Was born in a cavern of these mountains. Like the river in yonder valley, whose first drops flow from some cliff that weeps in a deep grotto, the first moments of my life sped amidst the shadows of a secluded retreat, nor vexed its silence. As our mothers draw near their term, they retire to the caverns, and in the innermost recesses of the wildest of them all, where the darkness is most dense, they bring forth, uncomplaining, offspring as silent as themselves. Their strength-giving milk enables us to endure without weakness or dubious struggles the first difficulties of life; yet we leave our caverns later than you your cradles. The reason is that there is a tradition amongst us that the early days of life must be secluded and guarded, as days engrossed by the gods.

My growth ran almost its entire course in the darkness where I was born. The innermost depths of my home were so far within the bowels of the mountain, that I should not have known in which direction the opening lay, had it not been that the winds at times blew in and caused a sudden coolness and confusion. Sometimes, too, my mother returned, bringing with her the perfume of the valleys, or dripping wet from the streams to which she resorted. Now, these her home-comings, although they told me naught of the valleys or the streams, yet, being attended by emanations therefrom, disturbed my thoughts, and I wandered about, all agitated, amidst my darkness. 'What,' I would say to myself, 'are these places to which my mother goes and what power reigns there which summons her so frequently? To what influences is one there exposed,

so conflicting, that she returns each day moved by varying emotions?' My mother would return, now all a-quiver with intense joy, now sad and languid like one wounded. The joy that she brought with her showed itself from afar in certain features of her gait and manifested itself in her expression; I felt it throughout my whole being. But her depression affected me much more and led me further into the maze of conjectures to which my thoughts inclined.

At such moments my strength bewildered me; I recognized therein a power which could not remain unaccompanied; and following the impulse, whether to wave my arms about, or to gallop faster and faster through the spacious darkness of the cavern, I would strive to discover, in the blows that I dealt the empty air, and in the frantic haste of my steps, toward what goal my arms were destined to be extended and my feet to bear me. Since then, I have wound my arms about the necks of centaurs and the bodies of heroes and the trunks of oak trees; my hands have felt the rocks and the waters, the numberless plants, and the most impalpable breathings of the air; for I raise them, in the dark and tranquil nights, that they may surprise the zephyrs, and draw therefrom signs whereby to foreknow my path. And my hoofs — see, O Melampus, how they are worn! And yet, all cold and lifeless as I am in my extreme old age, there are days when, in the bright sunlight, on the mountain-tops, I feel again the thrill of those wild flights of my youth in the cavern, and with the same end in view, wave my arms and put forth all that I have left of speed.

Those moments of agitation alternated with long respites from every restless impulse. At such times I had in my whole being no other sense than that of growth, and of the stages of life succeeding each other within my breast. Having lost the love of excitement and having sought refuge in complete repose, I enjoyed without alloy the beneficence of the gods, which filled my soul. Tranquillity and darkness enhance the secret fascination of the sentiment of life. Ye shadows who dwell in the caverns of these mountains, to your silent care I owe the secret education which afforded me such powerful sustenance, and the enjoyment, under your protection, of life in all its purity, as it came to me straight from the bosom of the gods! When I went forth from your shelter into the light of

day, I stumbled and did not salute the light, for it took possession of me with violence, intoxicating me as a baneful liquor suddenly poured down my throat might do; and I felt that my soul, till then so fearless and so simple, was shaken, and lost much of its substance, as if it were destined to be scattered to the winds of heaven.

O Melampus! who would fain know the life of the centaurs, — why did it please the gods to direct your steps to me, the oldest and most melancholy of them all? It is long since I have lived their life in aught. I never quit this mountain-top, to which age has bound me. The points of my arrows no longer serve me save to uproot the obstinate plants; the placid lakes know me still, but the rivers have forgotten me. I will tell you a few incidents of my youth; but these reminiscences, born of an impaired memory, ooze forth like the drops of a scanty libation dripping from a broken jar.

I have described without difficulty the first years, because they were calm and undisturbed; mere life, uncomplicated, satisfied my desires; such a life may be recalled and narrated without effort. A god, if begged to tell his life's story, would tell it in a word, O Melampus!

My youth passed swiftly amidst excitement. I lived on motion and knew no bounds to my steps. In the pride of my unhindered strength, I wandered to every part of these deserts. One day, when I was following a valley little frequented by centaurs, I espied a man walking beside the river on the other bank. He was the first I had ever seen — I despised him. 'Behold,' said I, 'a creature that is at most the half of myself! How short its steps are, and its gait how awkward! Its eyes seem to gaze upon space with a melancholy look. Doubtless it is a centaur disgraced by the gods, whom they have doomed thus to drag himself along.'

Often I passed my days with delight in the bed of some stream. One half of me, hidden in the water, strove to rise above it, while the other half held itself calmly erect, and I lifted my slothful arms far above the waves. I would forget myself thus amidst the rippling waters, yielding to the force of the current, which bore me far, and guided its wild guest to all the charms of its banks. How often, surprised by the fall of night, have I followed the current beneath the shadows as they lengthened, bearing even to the very

heart of the valleys the nocturnal influence of the gods! Then my overflowing life became so tempered that it left but a faint sentiment of my existence diffused equally through my being, even as the radiance of the goddess who wanders abroad of nights shone in the streams where I swam.

Melampus, my old age sighs for the streams; placid for the most part, and unchanging, they follow their destiny more calmly than the centaurs, and with a wisdom more beneficent than that of mankind. When I left their bosom, I was attended by their gifts, which accompanied me for days, and left me only by slow degrees, as perfumes do.

A reckless and blind vacillation guided my steps. In the midst of the maddest race I would sometimes come abruptly to a standstill, as if an abyss yawned at my feet, or as if a god stood before me. These sudden pauses gave me time to feel how my whole life was agitated by my wild outbreaks. At other times I have cut branches in the forest, and, as I ran, held them above my head; my headlong speed would check the mobility of the leaves, so that they would make only a faint rustling; but at the slightest pause, the breeze and movement would enter again into the branch and it would resume its murmuring. In like manner my pulses, on the sudden intermission of the reckless races that I ran through these valleys, throbbed madly throughout my frame. I could hear the rushing and roaring of the flame that had been kindled in them as I flew through space. My heaving flanks struggled against their waves, which pressed upon them from within; and in those tempests of emotion they tasted the keen pleasure, known only to the shores of the sea, of confining without injury a life excited and irritated to the highest pitch.

Meanwhile, my head inclined to the wind which brought me its refreshing coolness, I would gaze up at the mountain-peaks which suddenly seemed far away, at the trees on the banks, and the waters of the streams; the last running with a sluggish current, the trees rooted to the bosom of the earth and mobile only in the branches swaying at the will of the zephyrs, that set them to whispering and moaning. 'I alone,' I would say to myself, 'I alone am free of motion, and transport myself at will from end to end of these valleys.

I am more fortunate than the torrents that fall from the mountains, never to reascend them. The beating of my hoofs is more melodious than the lamentations of the forest and the plashing of the waves; it is the echo of the wandering centaur who guides his own steps!' And so, while my heaving sides were still intoxicated with the excitement of the race, above I thrilled with the pride of it, and, turning my head, I would stand a while and gaze at my steaming flanks.

Youth is like the verdant forests tormented by the winds; it waves in all directions the rich gifts of life, and always there is a deep murmuring amidst its foliage. Living with the guilelessness of the streams, breathing the perfume of Cybele at all times, either in the heart of the valleys or on the mountain-tops, I leaped and bounded hither and thither like a blind yet unfettered being. But when night, filled with the peace of the gods, overtook me on the slopes of the mountains, it guided me to the entrance of the caverns and soothed me even as it soothes the waves of the sea, leaving alive within me slight undulations which held sleep aloof but troubled not my rest. Lying on the threshold of my retreat, my trunk hidden in the cave and my head beneath the sky, I followed the changing spectacle of the night. Thereupon the unnatural life that had filled me through the day departed from me drop by drop, returning to Cybele's peaceful bosom, as, after the down-pour, the rain-drops that cling to the leaves fall at last and rejoin their fellows.

'Tis said that the sea-gods leave, during the darkness, their palaces in the deeps, and, seating themselves on the headlands, let their glances range over the waves. Thus did I watch, having at my feet an expanse of life like the drowsy sea. Returning anew to a well-marked and overflowing existence, it seemed to me that I had just been born, and that deep streams which had conceived me in their womb had left me on the mountain-top, like a dolphin cast on the quicksands by Amphitrite's waves.

My eyes roamed freely as far as my sight could reach. Like banks always glistening with moisture, the mountain-range in the west glowed with sunbeams loath to be banished by oncoming night. In the pale twilight still towered peaks, bare and distinctly out-

lined. There I saw decending, now the god Pan, always alone; now the choir of secret divinities; or perhaps some mountain nymph might pass, intoxicated by the darkness. Sometimes the eagles of Mount Olympus soared through the upper air and vanished among the farthest stars or within the inspired forests. The spirit of the gods, bestirring itself, suddenly disturbed the tranquillity of the secular oaks.

You, O Melampus! pursue wisdom, and wander among men like a mortal led astray by the Fates. There is in these regions a stone which, if one but touch it, gives forth a sound like that made by the strings of an instrument when it breaks; and men tell how Apollo, as he drove his flock in the wilderness, laid his lyre on that stone and so left the melody there. O Melampus! the wandering gods have laid their lyres upon the stones, but not one — no, not one has carelessly left his there.

In the days when I lay watching in the cavern, I sometimes thought I was on the point of surprising the dreams of the sleeping Cybele, and that the mother of the gods, betrayed by her dreams, might disclose some of her secrets: never heard I aught save sounds that died away on the night-breeze, or words as inarticulate as the plashing of the waves.

‘O Macareus,’ said to me one day the mighty Cheiron, over whose old age I watched, ‘we are both centaurs of these mountains; but how contrary are our habits! I, as you see, devote the energies of all my days to the study of plants, and you are like those mortals who have found upon the streams or in the woods, and put to their lips, a fragment of the pipes broken by the god Pan. Henceforth those mortals, having inhaled from that relic of the god an untamed spirit, or, it may be, having become infected with some hidden madness, rush into the desert places, or roam the forests, skirt the streams, and are blended with the mountains, perturbed in spirit, and borne on by an unknown destiny. The mares beloved of the winds in farthest Scythia are not more savage than you, nor sadder at evening, when the North Wind has gone to rest. Seek you the gods, O Macareus, whence issued man and animals and the principles of universal fire? Old Ocean, father of all things, keeps these secrets close within his breast, and the

nymphs who surround him, singing, pour forth a never-ceasing chorus before him, to drown what might perchance escape his lips half-opened in sleep. Those mortals who by their virtue approach the gods receive from them lyres wherewith to charm the nations, or new seed to enrich them, but from their inexorable lips no word.

'In my youth Apollo turned my thoughts toward the plants and taught me to extract from their veins the beneficent juices. Since then I have guarded faithfully the wide domain of these mountains, restless, indeed, but devoting myself unceasingly to the quest of simples, and making known the healing virtues which I discover. Do you see yonder the bald peak of Mount Oeta? Alcides stripped it bare to build his pyre. O Macareus! the demi-gods, children of the gods, stretch lions' skins on the funeral pyres, and consume themselves on the mountain-tops. Earthly poisons infect the blood inherited from the immortals. And we, centaurs conceived by an audacious mortal in the womb of a cloud bearing the likeness of a goddess, what succour can we expect from Jupiter, who struck down the father of our race? The vulture of the gods rends forever and ever the vitals of the workman who fashioned the first man.

'O Macareus! men and centaurs acknowledge as the authors of their being those who filched the privilege of the gods; and it may be that every living thing outside the gods themselves is naught save something that has been stolen from them, a trifling fragment of their nature, borne afar, like the seed that flies, by the all-powerful breath of destiny. 'Tis said that Aegeus, Theseus' father, concealed beneath a mass of rock on the sea-shore, tokens and signs whereby his son might some day learn his birth. The jealous gods have buried somewhere evidence of the origin of all things; but to the shore of what ocean did they roll the stone that hides it, O Macareus!'

Such was the goal of wisdom to which great Cheiron guided me. Reduced to extreme old age, the centaur nourished in his mind the noblest sentiments. His breast, still unafraid, had scarce begun to settle down upon his flanks, above which it still towered with but a slight inclination, like an oak saddened by the winds, and the vigor of his footsteps was scarcely impaired by the waste of years.

One would have said that he still retained fragments of the immortality once received from Apollo, which he had since restored to that god.

For my part, O Melampus! I am decending upon old age, calm as the stars at their setting. I have courage still to climb to the summits of the cliffs, and there I linger, it may be to contemplate the wild and restless clouds, or to watch the rainy Hyades, the Pleiades, or great Orion, rise above the horizon; but I know that I am failing and wasting swiftly away, like snow floating on the waves, and that ere long I shall be one with the streams that flow upon Earth's boundless bosom.

• One hundred and thirty-five copies printed by Bruce Rogers at the Montague Press in November, 1915. One hundred copies for sale.

“Facilis descensus Averni”

While the Proofreader was taking a holiday and the Printer stood rapt in admiration of his own work, the Devil got into the types, and stopping twice before descending, carried off two perfectly useless letters.

For those who prefer modern spelling to that of the XIV century, duplicates, securely boxed, are here supplied gratis.

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